



Making Business Sense of Online Memorials

While not a new concept, the abundance and variety of online memorial offerings has created confusion among funeral directors seeking to reap the benefits of new technologies. The key to leveraging these new and evolving technologies is first to define online memorials in the context of what families are seeking, and second to demonstrate how they can be used as a valuable, complementary service offering in the funeral industry.

The acceptance of online memorials is increasingly being driven by the growing, nearly pervasive, use of social media sites. The share of adult Internet users with a profile on an online social network site has more than quadrupled in the past four years -- from 8% in 2005 to 35% in December 2008, according to the Pew Internet & American Life Project's tracking survey. Recent news stories have marveled at the seemingly overnight rise and reach of social media websites like Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, especially among parents and mature adults. These online destinations give users a place to meet, re-connect, share information and interact in a "social" atmosphere, often instantaneously. Online memorials are becoming an expectation among families rather than an adjunct service, whether provided by the funeral industry or through other sources. According to Compete.com site analytics, April 2009, more than 40 million online visits were made to basic, antiquated online memorial and obituary sites.

Online Memorials De-Cluttered

Recently, several companies have realized that the fundamental social aspect of funerals aligns with the explosive trend of social communities. These firms have created sites that translate the concept of web-based social interaction to the memorial or remembrance market. Seemingly overnight, hundreds of "memorial sites" have emerged leaving funeral directors with the challenge of separating the wheat from the chaff. Most online remembrance ventures are variations on a theme and can be categorized as simple online obituaries or sites with added functionality like detailed guest books or photo albums. Recently, however, an entirely new class of online memorials that integrates immersive technology (aka virtual reality) and social networking in its purest form, have emerged.

Online Obituaries

In the late nineties, some newspapers began offering an online component to their printed obituary selections through sites like Obituaries.com. These online obituaries, which often add a simple guestbook component, offer a place for visitors to share their thoughts with the family of the deceased in a one-way communication. There is no sense of community with those the deceased knew personally.

These sites are located primarily by individuals searching for an obituary for a specific individual, rather than anyone looking for an online memorial or tribute. Typically, family members can post a biography, obituary, and other information about the deceased. Visitors can make donations, add memories to the journal or offer condolences. A photo gallery and slideshow may be added. While free to create, a sponsorship fee usually is required after a

specific amount of time. The most visited site in the online obituary category is Leagacy.com.

Added Functionality

Building on the concept of online obituaries, several companies are offering similar sites with added features. Each has a unique tone -- some cater to the celebrity-enamored public, others seek to provide a personal tribute. Most sites in this category augment the basic obituary listing with a guestbook, customized memorial gifts and places for stories, poems, eulogies, music, letters, and photos. Some even offer background themes similar to those available from basic web site hosting firms. Sites like these have lost market share as families look for online memorials with greater customization, improved social interaction, and better flexibility in terms of purpose and design. Fed by the burgeoning popularity of sites like Facebook, memorial providers, like Respectance.com, have attempted to capture the essence of the Web 2.0 experience by transforming static online obituaries into gathering places for mourners to share stories, pictures and condolences.

Immersive Technology

In the last six months, however, more elaborate sites have emerged with immersive memorial venues that rival the interactivity and graphics seen in Hollywood movies. While sophisticated, these online memorials are easy-to-use and represent the first truly original advances since the debut of online obituaries. The intent behind these nascent sites appears to be a true commitment to celebrating, honoring and remembering the legacy of the deceased in a respectful, unencumbered environment with many companies pledging to remain 100% ad free. The hallmark of this category is the ability to successfully marry the concept of social media with a unique, fully-immersive online environment. Instead of standard, static, website templates, immersive memorials offer a selection of photo-quality, multi-dimensional landscapes such as snow covered mountains or a Zen garden. These landscapes form the palette on which families and friends can create a highly personalized, evolving memorial and visit to share, and interact anytime from anywhere.

Immersive online memorials can be personalized by visitors as they celebrate and remember through tribute gifts, both traditional and personal items that represent something special about an individual. Memorial books can be populated with photos, videos, music, stories, and any number of expressions and separate guest books offer a forum for offering condolences. Social networking features let families and friends set up personal profiles, connect and interact in real-time, for generations to come. Unlike online obituaries or sites that have simply added functionality, immersive online memorials exude the feel of a live graveside and allow friends and family members to pay respects, share memories, and interact, even though they may be thousands of miles away. An example of a company that does this is EternalSpace.com.

How People Use Social Media

To understand the impact social media is having on the funeral industry and the need to understand and select the optimal online

offering for its families, funeral professionals must first understand how society is using social networks that are unrelated to the end-of-life. Using Facebook, the leading social network, as the benchmark, most people use the service to connect with friends, keep up with the activity of family and friends, and re-establish relationships with friends from the past. In effect, the site enables a wider sphere of connectivity. Using this new media, individuals can spread important events and information across the globe, virtually instantaneously. A recent example of this is the highly successful Earth Hour campaign, which was promoted almost exclusively via online sites.

According to the Altimeter Group, an online strategy consulting firm, people “use social networking sites to stay in touch with people. They reconnect to share old memories and to find out what has happened in each other’s lives. The benefit is staying in touch on an ongoing basis with many people, without having to spend a lot of time and effort to do so. Nataki Clarke, director of online marketing with AARP echoed this sentiment, describing social networks as “a way of connecting with a community. It’s a benefit because people can meet up and talk about whatever they’re going through, whether that’s a single’s perspective later in life, life after loss or health-care issues.”

A growing trend among social media sites is to encapsulate an idea in an extremely small amount of space (140 characters for Twitter), most likely to make mobile interaction with the sites more feasible. These “updates” are broadcast to friends or fans in a continuous stream interspersed with comments from others in what is commonly called a lifestream, a chronological aggregated view of an individual’s life activities. Some of these social networks are used to create business connections or to store and share photos, videos, presentations, and even sound files. For the funeral industry, this means an online memorial must meet all these needs, from the ability to create a life capsule with unlimited storage that holds the legacy of a dear one, to the ability to connect and communicate using small bites of information.

The needs of a family during an end-of-life episode are similar to the needs of anyone using a social network; friends must be notified, information about services posted and condolences shared. Today, geographic boundaries and economic concerns prevent many from participating in physical memorial celebrations. As such, there is an increasing need to provide a means for communal grief that does not require participation in a physical memorial service. Because online obituaries and collaborative social sites each have free counterparts in the mainstream culture, charging a fee for these services is only possible when the product or service offered is strikingly different and unique. Since families have so little time to spend customizing such a service at the outset, the choices must be easy to make and the information easily updatable by funeral home personnel.

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While the history of online memorials can offer a fascinating glimpse into the progression of the relationship between the funeral industry and the Internet, most funeral directors and industry leaders are still left wondering how social media and memorial

sites affect their customers, their business plans, and their bottom line. What online memorial services should a funeral home offer clients? What additional benefits or features will satisfy a client family’s needs? Is there a profit to be made from offering these new services?

Basic obituary sites have offered revenue-sharing with participating funeral directors, with, as expected, most revenue coming from ad sales. On the opposite end of the spectrum, more full-featured sites have followed the Facebook model by offering services free to all users. While the online collaboration is definitely “social,” the model does not offer any funeral home compensation and offers free membership to anyone in the world.

Immersive online memorials, like those from EternalSpace.com, are sold directly through funeral industry partners and feature a “perpetual care guarantee” that ensures the purchased space will be available indefinitely. As a value-added service, companies providing immersive online memorials provide what many consumers believe is an easy-to-use, premium-quality virtual experience that easily complements a funeral home’s existing services. Funeral homes benefit by meeting the evolving needs of their families while securing an opportunity to generate perpetual “passive revenue” in the form of paid tribute gifts. Visitors can purchase gifts in memory of the deceased and place them within the landscape. Each gift includes a tag to identify the sender and to relay a message. By providing its memorial sites solely through funeral industry partners, these firms help raise their partners’ stature and value within the community and facilitate more frequent on-going communication with families, both pre-need and those served in the past.

Online memorials are fast becoming the “must-have” digital accessory for funeral services, which means making these products available can increase market share and revenue. To stay relevant, social networking sites and online memorials will need to evolve to meet the needs and demands of users. Early versions and applications have quickly become outdated and are being replaced with immersive technology and highly interactive offerings. While choosing an online memorial product to add to current offerings might be a difficult decision, it is no longer an option, but an expectation. A funeral home’s customer base is increasingly knowledgeable about the options available and is eager to share their grief and precious memories online with the world. Online memorials demonstrate to a new generation of families that a funeral home understands the important role online social communities play in the everyday lives of its families, and indicate that a funeral home is committed to going beyond expectations to meet every family’s needs. **FBA**

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